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Old Myths and New Realities: Uncovering the Implications of Senator J. William Fulbright's Middle East Peace Plan

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OLD MYTHS AND NEW REALITIES:

UNCOVERING THE IMPLICATIONS OF SENATOR J. WILLIAM FULBRIGHT'S MIDDLE EAST PEACE PLAN

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Abstract:

On August 24, 1970, Senator J. William Fulbright presented the speech "Old Myths and New Realities II: The Middle East" to the United States Senate. The intent of this paper is to uncover the sign)ficant implications of Senator Fulbright's delivery of this particular speech at this particular moment in American History. In brief, Fulbright proposed a bilateral agreement between the United States and Israel, whereby Israel would return the conquered Arab lands of the 1967 War in exchange for military protection from the United States. The speech, when taken out of context, provides a fairly simple plan to initiate peace in the Middle East. However, in relation to the events of 1969 and 1970, and specifically to the increasing alliance of the Soviet Union and Egypt, the Fulbright Peace plan offered a solution not only to the Arab-Israeli conflict, but also to the Cold War rivalry in the Middle East and to the perceived ineffectiveness of the United Nations.

The crucial timing of the release of "Old Myths and New Realities II: The Middle East" reflected Fulbright's awareness that continued attacks between Israel and thefedayeen (Egyptian-trained Arab fighters) would inevitably draw the United States into war with the Soviet Union. Angered by a series of inadequately implemented peace initiatives resulting from the unstable relationship between the Administration and the State Department, Fulbright could remain silent no longer. Moreover, the method of release (the speech was published widely both domestically and abroad before it was delivered on the Senate floor) reflected Fulbright's growing frustrations with the dwindling influence of the United States Congress over foreign policy decisions. Unfortunately, the proposal was rejected immediately by Israel and ignored by the administration. However, it received significant attention from the media.

Old Myths for New Realities

On August 24, 1970, Senator J. William Fulbright presented the speech "Old Myths and New Realities II: The Middle East" to the United States Senate. A lengthy thirty-seven pages, the speech offered a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and specifically to the increasing alliance of the Soviet Union and Egypt, an alliance that had peaked in the late summer months of 1970. In brief, Fulbright proposed a bilateral treaty between the United States and Israel, whereby Israel would return the conquered Arab lands of the Six-Day War (1967) in exchange for military protection from the United States. Moreover, the Fulbright Peace Plan, as it was called, would have to be accepted and guaranteed by the United Nations Security Council. The speech, when taken out of context, provides a fairly simple plan to initiate peace in the Middle East. However, when examined

in relation to the long series of American foreign policy blunders in the Middle East, "Old Myths and New Realities II" reflects the evolution of the Senator's thought on the conflict. The manner and timing of the speech's release are significant factors in understanding the Senator's aims and intentions, which included an explication of his philosophy regarding the role of Congress in foreign policy decision-making and an avowal of his dissatisfaction with the secrecy of the Nixon Administration.

Fulbright's involvement in the Middle East stemmed primarily from his reaction to a succession of foreign-policy blunders that angered and frustrated him, the result of each blunder being an increased and alarming Soviet presence in the region. In 1950, the United States, taking a naïve Atlanticist perspective, signed the Tripartite Declaration with Britain and France, in which each agreed to "prevent an arms race among the major local powers in the Middle East, in particular Egypt, Iraq, and Israel."[1] The declaration ultimately backfired because the new, powerful Prime Minister of Egypt 'Abd al-Nassir (Nasser), having knowledge of the agreement, turned to the Soviet Union for military aid. The military aid would prove necessary in the 1956 Suez Crisis. In December of 1955, under the leadership of President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles offered $56 million to Egypt to fund the Aswan Dam project, part of Nasser's campaign to modernize the state. Nasser, hoping for a better offer from the Soviets, did not respond to Dulles. Aggravated, Dulles hastily withdrew the offer. In order to fund the Dam on his own, Nasser nationalized the Universal Suez Canal Company, startling the Western allies. Desperate, the British and French joined the Israeli attack on the fedayeen (Egyptian-trained Arab fighters) that was already in progress. The Eisenhower Administration called for an immediate cease-fire; European influence in the region completely disintegrated. The Soviets, sensing an opportunity to extend their influence, offered to participate in the Aswan Dam project which "alarmed Washington officials."[2] Fulbright blamed Dulles for causing the conflict and called for an immediate Senate investigation.

In 1970, the possibility of a superpower conflict in the Middle East reached a volatile level. The Soviet Union, by this time, had deployed 15,000 military personnel to Egypt. Nasser, now the recognized leader of the Arab Nationalist movement and founder of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, had begun a war of attrition along the Israeli-Egyptian border. In July, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir told President Nixon that Israel had installed SA-2 and SA-3 batteries along the border. The Administration panicked, realizing that the slightest sign of aggression by the Arabs could result in a direct confrontation between Israel and the Soviet forces that were now dominant in the Sinai. Within days of Meir's warning, Israeli Phantom jets came under fire in the Canal Zone. Secretary of State William Rogers negotiated a cease-fire that began on August 7, 1970. However, on August 13, 1970, Israeli intelligence revealed that Nasser and the Soviets had moved additional weapons into the standstill zone. The United States had no evidence to prove that these movements had occurred because the State Department failed to order U-2 reconnaissance planes to photograph the area on the day that the cease-fire was implemented. Israel was outraged by the poor planning and grew increasingly desperate due to the lack of American action against these violations. The mistake increased the urgency of the Arab-Israeli conflict—one factor that prompted the Senator to make his most extensive commentary on the Middle East that August.

Furthermore, Israel and Egypt, as part of the cease-fire compromise, agreed to enter into negotiations under the auspices of the United States Ambassador to the United Nations, Gunnar Jarring. Fulbright did not want to see the Administration force a quick solution to the conflict, as had occurred in the aftermath of the Suez Crisis. Rather, the Senator believed in public discussion of major foreign policy decisions, and he believed that Congress provided the appropriate arena for this type of discussion. Thus, an elaborate effort to release the speech both in abstract form and in its entirety was undertaken by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee staff (Fulbright served as chairman of the SFRC from 1959 until 1974). An advance copy was forwarded to Secretary of State Rogers with a personal note from the Senator that stated flatly, "I have just finished this. I hope it may be helpful to you. If not denounce it."[3] A briefing was held for all major media, and excerpts of the speech ran in the Washington Post and the New York Times. The excerpts ran one day prior to the delivery of the speech on the Senate floor and two days prior to the start of the Jarring negotiations. Indeed, Fulbright intended to exert his influence and encourage a debate on all levels from the mass public, to the media, to the Administration. Fulbright's insistence that any further peace initiatives for the Middle East be discussed in Congress reflected his growing frustration with the lack of communication between Congress and the Administration.

In truth, Fulbright's frustration began with the Eisenhower Administration during the 1950's. On January 5, 1957, the Administration introduced Joint Resolution 19 which authorized the President to employ the Armed Forces at any time to protect the nations of the Middle East from international communism. Fulbright vehemently opposed this resolution because it granted unprecedented freedom to the Executive Branch with regards to foreign policy. As debate continued, Fulbright delivered an impassioned speech against the resolution, calling it a "blank check."[4] The speech marked the beginning of Fulbright's public campaign against the American policy on the Middle East. However, the Administration implored Congress not to deny the President the ability to protect American national security. On March 5, 1957, Joint Resolution 19—the Eisenhower Doctrine—passed. In the next two years the Doctrine was applied to three separate crises in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. The quick succession of these events over a two-year period, without the

consent of Congress, fostered an unprecedented sense of instability and marked a turning point in the history of the Senator's involvement in the conflict. Each of the crises backfired against the United States, increasing Soviet influence in the region, and accordingly, Fulbright marked each event with continued criticism on the Senate floor. As the Arab-Israeli conflict erupted again in 1970, Fulbright resumed his condemnation of unchecked Executive power. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee moved to revoke the Eisenhower Doctrine and the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution—which allowed Johnson to intervene in Vietnam—as a symbolic statement that Congress should not be by-passed in foreign policy making. The revelation of the secret attack on Cambodia in May of 1970 only antagonized the feeling of distrust that Fulbright had for the Nixon administration, in particular. This distrust, in addition to the foreign-policy blunders aforementioned, motivated the Senator to offer the Fulbright Peace Plan, though he knew it would prove controversial.

The plan, as previously stated, consisted of both a bilateral agreement between the United States and Israel and a multilateral agreement through the United Nations. According to the Senator's reasoning, each piece was necessary to a peaceful solution in the Middle East. The bilateral agreement addressed what Fulbright considered to be the root of the conflict—Israeli insecurity. He believed that if Israel's statehood were protected, it would relinquish the conquered territories of the 1967 War. The multilateral agreement would ensure Soviet support of the proposal, since it would have to be passed by the Security Council. Fulbright reasoned that all the Soviets really desired was a role in the decision-making process. Furthermore, if the United Nations was entrusted to secure peace in the region, its reputation could be revived—a reputation that had suffered from several unenforceable resolutions such as Resolution 242 which ended the 1967 War and called for Israeli withdraw from the occupied Arab territories. Thus, the proposal serves as a clear example of Fulbright's characteristic methodology—his unique way of proceeding—whereby the microscopic focus on a specific problem (the crises in the Middle East) is seen within the realm of a macroscopic goal (the renovation of the United Nations and the sustained balance of power of the Cold War); such a process of thought belongs recognizably to Fulbright.

The bevy of articles that appeared after the release of "Old Myths and New Realities II" ranged from vehement criticism to unprecedented applause. The media focused on two primary points of contention—the proposal's feasibility and its inconsistency with regard to the Senator's position on Vietnam. Critics were correct in their analysis that Israel would not accept the proposal. Fulbright ignored the violation of the cease-fire in his speech, and in an attempt to offer an even-handed policy, Fulbright alienated Israel with his considerate treatment of the Soviets. Other journalists called the Senator a hypocrite for denouncing American involvement in Vietnam, yet offering American troops to protect Israel. However, Fulbright's supporters in the media proclaimed him to be "The Signalman Senator" who examined each foreign policy situation in its own right, without the influence of the Jewish lobby.[5] Syndicated columnist Walter Lippmann noted Fulbright's prophetic status, stating that "it has been said of him [Fulbright] that all too often he was right too soon."[6] Indeed, as the Arab-Israeli conflict continues to claim lives today, Fulbright's proposal was reiterated in his own speeches, as well as in the Brookings Report on the Middle East and the American-Soviet Joint Resolution on Peace in the Middle East.

Endnotes:

1 Geoffrey Kemp, "Strategy and Arms Levels, 1945-1967," in *Soviet-American Rivalry in the Middle East* edited by J.C. Hurewitz (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969) 31.

2 Robert W. Stookey, *American and the Arab States: An Uneasy Encounter* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1975) 139.

3 J. W. Fulbright to William Rogers, August 21, 1970, Senatorial Papers of J. William Fulbright, Mullins Library, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas. Box 40: File 3.

4 *Congressional Record*, Senate, February 11, 1957, 1857.

5 Louis Heren, "Signalman Senator." *The Times* (London), 25 August 1970, p.8.

6 Walter Lippman, preface to *Fulbright of Arkansas*, edited by Karl E. Meyer (Washington, D.C.: Robert B. Luce, Inc., 1963) ix.

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Faculty Comments:

Faculty Mentor **Sidney Burris** comments:

First of all, Ms. Maxwell has identified an aspect of the Senator's career that still generates much discussion–his opinion on the Arab-Israeli conflict. And she has chosen to analyze one of the central documents that delves into this opinion–his speech, entitled "Old Myths and New Realities II: The Middle East." There is focus to her project; and, yet as she situates the speech within the long history of American relations with the Middle East, there is ample scope as well. The thesis itself, for which the current manuscript is essentially a precis, runs over fifty pages. In reconstructing the background of the speech, Ms. Maxwell has educated herself in the making of a historical narrative, and she has adroitly handled the chronological intricacies, the give-and-take of diplomatic negotiations, that characterized this particular segment of American history. Her work is important because it brings the Byzantine complexity of our Middle East negotiations to bear on the equally

complex structure of thought that lies behind the Senator's speech and so provides a helpful bridge between the informing history and the resulting speech--and this had not previously been done with the same detailed focus that characterizes her approach.

Second, her work has admirably accomplished one of the primary goals that the Honors Program originally envisioned with the required Honors thesis--Ms. Maxwell has plunged herself into the rigors of scholarly research; and, as a glance through her bibliography will show, she has consulted an array of primary sources, including the Fulbright manuscripts in our collection, the Congressional Record in Washington, D.C., interviews with three of the Senator's aides, writers, and press secretaries (Tillman, Williams, and Purvis), as well as the standard secondary sources. And she has carefully collated the material, sifting through the contradictory accounts, and gradually built the coherent picture that characterizes both this project and her thesis from which this project is drawn. She has quite quickly learned the necessity of making accurate historical judgments based on the available evidence, and her approach in each instance has been conservative--no conclusions are drawn where they are not clearly warranted by the material at hand. My training, of course, is in English; and, to direct this thesis and to keep pace with Ms. Maxwell, I have had to do much of the reading that she did, and I can attest to the mountain of information that she has read and digested. It is not that the analysis of a single speech shows extraordinary ambition; it is that the large volume of information that she consulted in reference to the single speech reveals her characteristic ambition to leave no stone unturned. As a researcher, she has been absolutely thorough and uncompromising in her use of sources.

Finally, I would point to the quality of her prose. As the project has progressed through successive drafts, she has moved closer and closer to achieving the kind of limpid style that it seems to me most befits historical narrative of this sort. Never self-conscious, her prose has become more and more adept at deftly handling the date-driven narrative that often characterizes diplomatic history. She has worked hard to effect a balance between chronological accuracy and narrative liveliness. And in my opinion she has largely succeeded--the achievement of a prose style, which is already well within her grasp, is another of this project's accomplishments.

Hoyt Purvis, Director of the Fulbright Institute of International Relations says of the work:

By any measure Ms. Maxwell's study is exceptionally fine and accomplished work, and for an undergraduate student it represents an extraordinary contribution.

Ms. Maxwell has studied and analyzed an important but relatively unexamined chapter in Senator Fulbright's history as a leading figure in American foreign policy and international relations. In the process she offers some valuable insight into Fulbright's views, his mode of operation, his strategy for attempting to influence the debate on U.S. policy in the Middle East, his efforts to use the media, and his relations with the Nixon Administration.

The historical context, background, and overall perspective of American foreign policy of the era is an especially strong feature of her work. She displays a clear understanding of what was important in the development of U.S. policy in the region and of Fulbaght's role. Her analysis and her interpretation are solid, well-founded, and persuasive.

Altogether she has done a highly impressive job of research and writing. Her mastery of the background and context is clear. Her research in the Fulbright Papers, as well as the interviews she conducted with Seth Tillman and Lee Williams, brings an especially valuable dimension to the work.

As a professor of international relations and as one who was involved in working with Senator Fulbright at the time of his 1970 speech, I find this to be a sophisticated, well-written, and insightful work of scholarship. It is clearly worthy of honor.

Fulbright scholar, Distinguished Professor of Diplomacy, and Dean of Fulbright College, **Randall B. Woods,** remarks:

I am writing to endorse, with great enthusiasm, Ms. Maxwell's project, "Old Myths and New Realities: Uncovering the Implications of Senator J. William Fulbright's 1970 Peace Plan for the Middle East." I have spoken with her at some length about it, and her conception of the senator's fundamental philosophy regarding the United States' relation with Israel and the Middle East is both sound and penetrating. By examining the senator's proposal to send American troops into Israel in exchange for the resumption of their original pre-1967 borders--the senator proposed this while he advocated withdrawing troops from Vietnam--Ms. Maxwell has isolated a sterling example of Fulbright's special brand of pragmatism. Conformity to historical precedent and consistency with an intellectual tradition, while they are worthy concerns for a history professor, can yield disastrous results in foreign policy. But the fact stubbornly remains that many of Fulbright's critics have heretofore missed this fundamental point. Senator Fulbright, however, did not, and Ms. Maxwell's project, while surgically directed toward a specific phase in the senator's career, will shed light on his

entire political philosophy. And it will correct what has become over the years a substantial misconception concerning a vital area of his thinking on international relations. In my judgment, it is a project of real importance that deserves publication.

The research that she has already completed reveals the kind of maturity seldom seen in an undergraduate. Last spring, before she left campus for the summer, she introduced herself to the Fulbright archivist in Mullins Library, obtained the credentials necessary to work with the manuscript collection, and became acquainted with the collection's basic layout--and she did this several months in anticipation of the project's beginning stages. She has now mastered the navigation of the collection. And, while she was in Washington this past summer, she began reading the relevant speeches in the Library of Congress. She returned to Washington during spring break to interview both Dr. Seth Tillman, Fulbright's ghostwriter, and Lee Williams, Fulbright's former Chief-of-Staff. I cannot honestly say that I know of a more disciplined and motivated scholar at the undergraduate level than Ms. Maxwell, particularly in a field where the sources for her work are so voluminous and unwieldy. Many older, more seasoned scholars would be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of material that is available, but Ms. Maxwell has gone through the relevant material with purpose and dedication. Perhaps even more impressive, however, than this substantial preparation is Ms. Maxwell's knowledge of Arabic. She will be able to consult a range of primary materials that previous Fulbright scholars, because of their ignorance of the language, have been unable to examine. This knowledge of Arabic alone gives Ms. Maxwell a clear advantage over many of the reputable scholars who are currently working on Fulbright, and I eagerly anticipate the results of her research into this fertile area.

Since her junior year, Ms. Maxwell has won a Truman Fellowship, the Fulbright College Prize for Distinction in the Liberal Arts, and The Johns Hopkins Essay Contest. Most recently, she was appointed to the USA-Today Academic All-American Second Team, and in December of 1999 she was awarded a SILO-SURF grant to complete her work on Fulbright, an indication of the overall merit of her project.